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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Air Force Suspends CAP's Search for Famed Aviator Steve Fossett

MAXWELL AFB, Ala. -- The search for record-setting aviator Steve Fossett ended today after a 20,000 square-mile search that included members of the Nevada, California, Utah, Idaho, Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas wings of the Civil Air Patrol in what amounted to one of the largest, most intensive searches for a missing aircraft in modern history.

Over the last decade, the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center and CAP have been involved in thousands of searches for missing aircraft and only 18 of those missions are unsolved. CAP members perform 90 percent of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the AFRCC, and was credited by the AFRCC with saving 58 lives in 2006.

"The Civil Air Patrol joins the rest of the aviation world and admirers worldwide in its disappointment in not locating Steve Fossett," said CAP Acting National Commander Brig. Gen. Amy S. Courter. "This remarkable man showed us what grit and determination are all about. In his life, he chased and shattered world records, floating and flying farther and faster than anyone before. His adventures are many and his accomplishments profound. We regret that those adventures may have come to an end."

The search for Fossett began Sept. 4 after he failed to return the day before to the Flying M Ranch's private airstrip near Yerington, Nev. Initially, more than 60 CAP Nevada Wing members and six aircraft were involved in the search effort. This expanded to include hundreds of members and more than 25 aircraft during the following days. Sophisticated "grid" searches of thousands of square miles of rugged, high-desert terrain were conducted by Civil Air Patrol volunteers who devoted in excess of 17,000 man hours both on the ground and in the air. CAP flew 629 flights totaling 1,774 flying hours.

Nearly a dozen radar analysis experts reviewed the Fossett radar data, including experts from the Federal Aviation Administration, the Air Force, Navy, National Transportation Safety Board and the Civil Air Patrol, using multiple approaches and

software tools, all looking for one thing – Steve Fossett’s radar track, said U.S. Air Force radar analysis expert Lt. Guy Loughridge, a Colorado Wing CAP member.

“Tracks often come in broken pieces because the radar sites see an aircraft for a short period and then the track vanishes below radar coverage or behind a mountain,” said Loughridge. “If Fossett’s plane flew below mountains at low altitudes, no amount of analytical effort or technology will detect his radar track. We cannot analyze what is not visible.”

The search included use of CAP’s cutting-edge ARCHER (Airborne Real-Time Cueing Hyperspectral Enhanced Reconnaissance) technology. ARCHER aircraft gave aircrews the ability to find unique objects on the ground using specially equipped on-board computers and hyperspectral sensor technology.

Noteworthy is that CAP’s efforts integrated fully with the Nevada Army and Air Guard, the state of Nevada Office of Emergency Management and Department of Public Safety. In addition, CAP also worked closely with local law enforcement agencies and massive private resources from both the Flying M Ranch and the Fossett family.

Last weekend CAP aircraft again flew over terrain judged by radar analysis to have the highest probability of being Fossett’s flight path. From the start of the operation these areas were searched repeatedly at different times of day and light angles in order for crews to better see into deep mountain ravines. Ground search teams on foot, horseback and all-terrain vehicles simultaneously combed the same target areas.

Despite this well-coordinated effort, Fossett and his aircraft remain undetected. “This is a testament to the unforgiving terrain comprising the search area,” said CAP search leader Lt. Col. E.J. Smith. “The combination of high altitude, thick forest and mountainous terrain proved to be unconquerable during this particular search operation.”

“Although the search effort by the Civil Air Patrol has been officially suspended by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center, should new information become available, CAP could be asked to assist once again with its considerable air assets,” said Courter.

The U.S. Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, was founded on Dec. 1, 1941, less than a week before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into World War II. CAP is a nonprofit organization with more than 56,000 members nationwide. Its volunteers also perform homeland security, disaster relief and counterdrug missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies. Members play a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to the more than 22,000 young people currently participating in the CAP cadet program.